

Washington, DC -- We all know how wasteful the federal government can be in spending our tax dollars. But every now and then, it's refreshing to learn that a government program is not only working, it may be saving lives. The national Children's Health Insurance Program is one investment that has paid off.

Nothing is more important than the health of our children. Yet many of the estimated 47 million Americans who go without health insurance every day are children.

In 1997, Congress approved by an overwhelming and bipartisan margin the creation of the Children's Health Insurance Program to extend health care to 6 million kids across the country. The results have been a resounding success. Since its creation, the program has reduced the number of uninsured kids in America by one-third. Nearly all of those children live in families with income levels not much higher than the federal poverty level, or about \$41,000 for a family of four.

Earlier this week, the House of Representatives voted to expand this program so that up to 10 million kids could be covered by the program. The bill was approved 265 to 159, with 44 Republicans joining me to support the measure. The bill was approved by the Senate with a bipartisan majority and will now be sent to the President.

I grew up in a blue-collar home with five brothers and sisters, so I understand the challenges and pressures facing working families. The skyrocketing cost of health care is often unattainable for families who struggle to put food on the table, pay the bills and save whatever is left over for college or retirement.

That's why the Children's Health program is such a worthwhile investment. It gives kids from low-income families access to the care and medicine they need to live healthy lives.

The program was conceived by a Republican Congress and a Democratic President. Money was sent to the states to administer the new benefit. Florida's Healthy Kids program was used as a model for the federal law.

Currently 6.6 million low-income kids nationally are enrolled, including 226,000 in Florida. The bill passed by the House would reauthorize the program for five years and provide states with sufficient funding to cover an additional 4 million kids. Florida would receive \$51 million more in 2008 to cover low-income children, according to the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

In August, I voted against flawed legislation that would have penalized senior citizens with punishing cuts to Medicare and would have opened the program to illegal immigrants. The compromise bill, which was rewritten by leaders of the House and Senate, is a big improvement over that proposal. The new bill does not cut Medicare for seniors and prohibits SCHIP funding for illegal immigrants.

Like most legislation that emerges from Congress, this bill is not perfect. But it represents significant progress as we search for ways to reduce the ranks of the uninsured and protect our children.

In addition to covering more kids, this bill shores up dental and mental health benefits. This is particularly important given that tooth decay is the most common chronic disease of childhood, while 1 in 10 kids suffer from serious mental health problems.

The bill is endorsed by a wide-range of groups including the American Medical Association, AARP, and the YMCA.

Millions of kids across the country have been given a healthy start in life thanks to this important program. We can't turn our backs on them now. Our kids are worth it.